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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an abstinence-based sex education group for diverse girls in grades 7-12 in an urban magnet school. Data were gathered from a within-school program, My Bottom Line, which was designed to prevent or delay the onset of sexual activity, build self-esteem, and increase young women's self-sufficiency through an abstinence based, gender specific prevention program that students attend voluntarily. The program runs for 15 weeks and promotes abstinence in relationships, even after girls have had sexual relationships. It teaches that girls have control of their bodies and should not accept male control or abuse. A cornerstone of the sex education group is confidentiality, which allows girls to bare secrets without fear of recrimination or gossip. The girls weave a form of collective strength that goes beyond individual abstinence. This group offers a place where trite social stereotypes are contested. Girls learn that women ought not be victims. Working through sensitive cross-race issues also encourages more open attitudes toward racial issues in general. (Contains 27 references.) (SM)

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Learning to Speak Out in an Abstinence Based Sex Education Group: Gender and Race Work in an Urban Magnet School

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Lois: Oh, Donna [a young woman in the group] was saying...looking at a sheet that you had given them, you know, instead of having sex, you go for a bike ride, watch television, et cetera, et cetera. And Donna looked at the sheet and said, "Well, we can't do these things. We're poor. We don't have bikes...We don't have a car." And you [Doris, the group leader] turned to her, and, without missing a beat, said, "Well, you're going to be even poorer if you have a baby or get AIDS."

Recent research on sexuality education in schools suggests that the current state of affairs is dismal. From Michelle Fine's (1988) research on what she terms the missing "discourse of desire", to work by Mariamne Whatley (1991), and, more recently, Bonnie Nelson Trudell (1993), we learn that in these curricula young men are painted as biologically programmed sexual aggressors, while young women are scripted as passive victims whose only subject position is that of not provoking easily sexually aroused males. While it is generally acknowledged that there is not nearly enough sexuality education in schools, that which does exist leaves much to be desired. In addition, research shows that compulsory heterosexuality is inscribed throughout the school curriculum, and most prominently in sex education curriculum, where AIDS is often drawn as a disease solely of homosexuals (Friend, 1993).

Taking into account these observations, and working from this perspective, it is clear that sexuality curriculum is about to become even worse. Due to the passage of recent legislation, abstinence based programs are slated to receive millions and millions of dollars under the Family Adolescent Life Act (AFLA, Title XX of the Public Health Act) and the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (otherwise known as "welfare reform"). Despite this massive funding, there has been little research concerning the effectiveness of one

type of program versus another (Wilcox, 1997; Kirby, 1997) and even less research on the day to day delivery of those programs which do exist.[1]

The fact remains, though, that millions of dollars are being poured into abstinence sex education programs in schools without any idea of outcomes. In this chapter I investigate one such abstinence based program and examine the good things that can happen in this space even under the most repressive of funding sources.

Contrary to the intention of funders, the space carved out by this program for girls is being used to promote very interesting counterhegemonic understandings of both gender and race.[2] In this space girls struggle to topple the lives that they feel will be theirs, under the careful guidance of a Latina group leader whom I observed and worked closely with. In this urban based magnet arts school, abstinence based funding is being used for some very progressive ends, ends that encourage young women across race/ethnicity to explore their own gendered subjectivities and, most of all, resist the violence and control that they feel lies ahead of them. This should not be construed as support on my part for any kind of "abstinence only" movement, nor be seen as any kind of indication that it is no longer important to fight such legislative initiatives. Clearly these political battles are, and will, continue to be critical. Nevertheless, it is important to know what we can do under these funding auspices given that they loom so large.

It must be clear from the beginning, though, that hegemonic definitions of heterosexuality were not questioned in the particular group studied. This group was aimed, unofficially, at helping young women to gain strength and control within the boundaries of heterosexual relationships. It did not, therefore, broach alternative sexual orientations.

Data were gathered during spring semester 1997 at "Arts Academy," a 5-12 magnet school geared toward the arts in Buffalo, New York. Students must be accepted into the school on the basis of an audition, either in dance, theater, music or visual arts, or radio and TV. The school

draws broadly from the city of Buffalo, although many of the students reside in poor and/or working class neighborhoods within a ten-minute ride of the school. The school is located just south of downtown Buffalo and, like all magnet schools in the city, as part of the desegregation plan, ostensibly acts as a magnet for white students to attend school in neighborhoods populated by people of color. The school is highly mixed racially and ethnically, having 45 percent white, 45 percent African American, 8 percent Latino/Latina, 1 percent First Nation's People, 1 percent Asian students. The ethnic/racial montage is everywhere visible, as students from varying backgrounds participate in academic and arts endeavors, spanning jazz combo to ballet.

Data were drawn from a within school program entitled My Bottom Line, a program whose officially stated goal is "to prevent or delay the onset of sexual activity, build self esteem and increase self sufficiency in young women through an abstinence based, gender specific prevention education program."[3] Students voluntarily attend the program during study halls, participating one or two times a week, depending on the schedule. The guidance counselor actively recruited Womanfocus, a non-profit agency designed to deliver the program to local area schools. It has the strong backing of the guidance counseling staff, and group meetings were held in the large, centrally located conference room of the guidance office.

As Shirley, the guidance counselor states,

> I really want these girls to take good risks with their lives and escape negative situations. I want them to be empowered to make good choices, to be able to leave town for college, to take internships, to take advantage of opportunities, to be able to leave their neighborhoods. Too many are trapped. I want them to delay sexual activity without being a prude so that they will be able to live fuller lives. Too many of these girls don't realistically see what a baby does to one's life. They have babies to make up for their own lost childhood and want to give

to the baby what they themselves did not have. But they do not have the resources or maturity to give to their baby what they didn't have.

Shirley invited Womanfocus into the school, and used all school resources possible to support the program. She talked with teachers on a regular basis, urging them to send students during their study halls and worked with teachers to facilitate this.

My Bottom Line is run by Doris Carbonell-Medina, a Latina Womanfocus staff member. I participated in all meetings for a full semester and acted, at times, as co-facilitator of the group. The program runs fifteen weeks. Although the program targets young women in seventh, eighth and ninth grades, young women from grades 7-12 participated, at the explicit request of Doris. Seventh and eighth graders meet together, and high school students meet in a different session.

The officially stated goal of the program is to reduce sexual activity among youth. As stated in the proposal for funding,

> The alarmingly high rate of teenage pregnancy, the risk of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases have served to open up and intensify the debate in this country and in the Buffalo community over what to do about the sexual activity of adolescents and the associated problems. What was once a moral issue is clearly a public health issue. Educators, parents, politicians, and health officials share concern and agree that clearly our current systems are failing to adequately equip our young people to handle the choices and the consequences they face in 1994.
>
> Current peer standards of sexual behavior, stronger media messages, shifting society values, and changing family configurations have all helped to confuse our teens as to how to handle their emerging sexuality. Abstinence, or refraining from sexual intercourse, has become a lost and understated option for

many teens. At best, our teens are not getting balanced messages about their choices with regard to sexual activity. At worst, there is no evident, consistently reachable "face saving" support for the teens who want to abstain or delay the onset of sexual activity.

Education for sexual abstinence, life skills to empower young women to assert their honest choices with regard to sexual activity, and the potential impact on adolescent sexual activity is the focus of the proposed My Bottom Line program (p. 3).

The expressed intention of the program is, then, one of encouraging abstinence among girls who are not yet sexually active; generally those in the seventh, eighth, and ninth grade. As noted earlier, this is, in fact, where the funding is. However, Doris insists on working with the older girls as well, specifically tying her decision to the rhetoric of abstinence:

Doris: Many people interpret abstinence-based program as, you know, very conservative, sort of right wing, concepts. Like that abstinence means they have to be "clamped shut", and you're saying, "that's it." And that's why we target those seventh, eighth, and ninth grade girls, because those are the years that they're going to be facing those crucial decisions in their life, as to whether or not they want to be having sex. And those are the years that girls choose this for their lives. But, on the other hand, those high school girls that have already made that choice [to have sex], or some that haven't, they also need some sort of intervention, and that knowledge that simply because you've been sexually active in one relationship doesn't mean that you have to be sexually active in another relationship. And, you know, young girls need to be given that information, or at least to be given the confidence to say,

"Hey, you don't have to sleep around with every single guy." There are some standards that you should have. There are some criteria that you should have in establishing your relationships. And I think those lines get blurred once you become sexually involved, and once you get into that whole world of adolescence and sex.

Tying her insistence on working with girls beyond ninth grade to a strongly held notion that these young women need to be given choices about relationships and sex even after they have had a sexual relationship, Doris works hard to let young women know that they do not have to be sexually available to every man simply because they are not virgins. In doing so, she stretches, intentionally, the purpose of the program:

Doris: You know, it's not that I don't care if they are having sex. If they are having sex, I just want them to be prepared to answer, if they are engaging in adult-like activity, that they should have adult-like responsibility. And that's where my focus is. Adult-like responsibility if you are, you know, assuming this way of life. And, I think that they need the confidence to know that they don't have to have sex with every guy that they go out with.

Lois: What do you mean by adult-like responsibility? You say it would be better if they didn't engage in sex, but if they engage in sex, then they have to, number one, you don't always have to have sex, but number two, you have to do so in an adult-like way. Can you say a little bit about what you mean by that?

Doris: Sure. Adult-like way, you have to be able to protect yourself from unwanted pregnancies, that you have to protect yourself from STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) and other related diseases. That you have to understand that you're placing yourself in a very emotional and vulnerable position when

> you begin to, you know, act, and you conduct yourself in your relationship with him, yeah. And that, a lot of times there can be some positioning that goes on [in the relationship; she is speaking of control], and even some abuse. And, I mean, your growth, you might think this [abuse] is normal, that it's okay for them [the young women] to be treated badly, or to be controlled. So that if, in fact, this is happening to you, then you have to recognize that this [abuse] is not right. And you have to take responsibility for yourself and get out. And tell somebody about this problem. So that's adult-like responsibility if you have a relationship with a member of the opposite sex, particularly if he's older than you. But now, we're [in the program] doing this thing that they're [the young women] signing a contract [laughs]...I devised this contract we outlined at the beginning of September. And we talked about it, that the girls agreed not to have sex until they can take care of themselves. And then I go on into it and define "take care of yourself."

This space was, then, in addition to dealing with issues of sexual abstinence, intentionally established in order to empower young women, particularly in their relationships with young men. For Doris and Shirley, the guidance counselor who was the impetus behind this program in the school, women's bodies must be under the control of women themselves, and should not be a site for male control, abuse, or exploitation. Both state strongly that women need to evidence choices over their bodies and minds, and that the lack of such choices means that these young girls/women will never venture outside their neighborhoods or their lived economic marginality. Empowering them to stay away from situations of abuse lies at the center of the unofficial programming. This is not, then, simply a program about abstinence, although the abstinence

strain is there. Abstinence based funding opens up a space that is used for additional purposes, although alternative directions need to be carefully carved out of stated conservative agendas.

In the midst of a society moving in increasingly polarized directions (Fine and Weis, 1998), such spaces are potentially important in this regard. The question is posed here: what is the nature of the "gender work" going on in this space? In this bold program designed to push at the very walls of specific gendered meanings, what are the implications for "race work" given that it is taking place in the particular context of the urban magnet school?

This project is part of a broader study of "urban spaces" (many of which appear in this volume), and pushes theoretically the work of Harry Boyte and Sara Evans (1992), Nancy Fraser (1993), and others. Fraser argues that it is advantageous for "marginals" to create what she calls "counterpublics" where they may oppose stereotypes and assert novel interpretations of their own shifting identities, interests and needs. She theorizes that these spaces are formed, ironically, out of the very exclusionary practices of the public sphere. We, too, have found that in the midst of disengagement by the public sector and relocation of private sector jobs "down south" or overseas, it is into newly constructed "free spaces", as Evans and Boyte (1992) call them, that poor and working class men and women have fled from sites of historical/pain and struggle, and reconstituted new identities (Fine and Weis, 1998).

In the broader study we stretch across spaces which are sites of explicit political resistance, such as those Boyte and Evans describe, to those that are more nearly recuperative spaces more aptly scripted by Oldenburg (1989). These are places for breathing, relaxing, sitting on a couch without the constant arrows of stereotypes and social hatred. Many of the spaces we have investigated, however, are spaces carved in conscious opposition by adults <u>for</u> adults (see Morton-Christmas, 2000, for example). Here we have a space set up as oppositional by adults <u>for</u> young women. The deep irony, of course, is that it is carved as oppositional under a funding

source that represents highly conservative thinking on the subject of adolescent sexuality and gender. In this space, which adults establish and facilitate, teens actively interact. Although the official intent of My Bottom Line is sexual abstinence, there is much other work going on in this site, both by adults and youth, which offer it as a powerful space for re-visioning gendered and race subjectivities as students gain a set of lenses and allies for doing social critique. As we have argued elsewhere, most youth have the potential for social critique, but this critique fizzles as they grow older (Fine and Weis, 1998; Weis and Fine, 1996; Fine, 1993). Here we focus on the preliminary consolidation of critique and enter the site, as I lived in it and worked with it, for six months. It is the gender and race work we visit here, work done under the explicit tutelage of Doris Carbonell-Medina, Esq.[4]

Bearing Secrets

A cornerstone of the group is confidentiality, a confidentiality which enables the girls to bear secrets without fear of recrimination or gossip. As Doris states,

> I tell them at the very beginning that this issue I take very seriously. And when we say that in order to build trusting relationships, in order to build relationships [in the group] where we can open up and tell our stories, that we have to be mature. And mature means that you don't go around and you gossip and stuff. Then I say that I get so crazy about this stuff that if it comes back to me that you've opened your mouth and blabbed—and that's how it's seen—you know, we'd ask you to leave. And that would be the way that we separate you from us, because we don't want you to be in our group if you can't keep our secrets. They're very careful about it I tell you. And they don't reveal anything [in group] that they don't want people to know. And then, if they've really got to

get it out—and many of them have done this to me—they have said, "Can I talk to you after the group?"

Embedded in the weaving of a new collective of young women across race lines is the bearing of secrets. The group is a space within which young women tell a great deal about their personal lives—the illnesses within their homes, the violence in their relationships, their fears spoken aloud when their "stepfather's moving back in with mom." Girls share secrets as they share strength and hope, jumping in to help each other with problems, sometimes life threatening, and other times, mundane. As they share secrets, they examine self and weave new identities, individual and collective. What is particularly striking in these data is the extent to which young white women reveal pieces of their lives normally not told. Although they are relatively quiet in group, as compared with African American girls, for example, those who do open up contest the suffocating silence which envelops them. White women, whether adolescents or adults, are the most silent/silenced group with which we have worked (Weis and Fine, 1998; Weis and Marusza; Weis, Marusza and Fine, 1998), speaking softly about the horrors in their lives only in one to one interviews, never in a group context. But not so here. White girls are cracking that silence so typical of the group, sharing secrets in protected environments, working beyond the one to one encounters. They are hearing each other out as they unburden their problems. Girls from a variety of backgrounds unravel their stories within the group context. Listen to Tiffany, who speaks with Lois and Tia in group:

Tiffany: I love my mother dearly. But, OK, she's manic depressive, but I love her dearly.

Lois: Is she really manic depressive?

Tiffany: Yeah, like she's got medication and everything. She's a manic depressive and my dad is schizophrenic—which is great for me [sarcastically]...She doesn't

make friends easily. I have to watch what I say, because I don't want to get her in a bad mood. She's on medication now. She's very caring, but she's smothering. Like, it's my birthday Monday, right. I'm like, since I was like nine, I have like, each birthday, I have a half an hour later that I can stay up. I mean, right now it's 9:30, and all my friends are sitting there going to bed at 11:00. And on Monday, I get to go to bed at 10:00 and that makes me so happy because I can go to bed at ten [laughs].

Tiffany goes on to tell us that she went through a bout of clinically diagnosed depression a couple of years ago.

Tiffany: Well, in the summer of the freshman year, two years ago, I like, it was like, well, the court thing, everybody's separate. They [my parents] go to court. And I have to choose who I want to stay with for this part of the summer and that part of the summer. And that's how I was just like, usually I'm all happy, you know, kind of like this [as she is now], kind of perky [laughs]...And so, like all of a sudden, I just...I remember sitting there on the bed and going, you know, "I can't do it anymore." Because I wasn't really happy. I was just getting tired. And I went into a slight, it wasn't a severe depression, but it was depression. I had medication and everything. And I just distanced myself from it and I went to a doctor—a psychiatrist—and everything, cause I like burst into tears at the slightest criticism.

Lois: Did they send you to a doctor?

Tiffany: Yeah, they sent me to a doctor. I went to a doctor because I was losin' weight, because I weighed 108. And I'm 5'8". And I dropped like twenty pounds that summer.

Tiffany speaks candidly about her clinically ill parents, weaving through the discussion her own feelings as she attempts to live in her mother's house. She is not the only one who speaks so openly about home based problems, and the uniqueness of this, particularly among white girls should not be underestimated. My Bottom Line offers a space within such secrets can be shared. Tiffany, of course, does not receive professional help in a group of this sort. What she does receive is support and understanding from her peers, monitored by an adult who is sensitive to these issues. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, someone like Tiffany feels less alone with her problems since she has shared them and learned, oftentimes, that she is not the only one with such problems. While teenagers, to be sure, often complain about their parents, this should not be seen simply as a "gripe session." Tiffany's parents are ill, and the sharing of this information, like the sharing of incidents of domestic violence, of violence in a personal relationship, represents one step toward acknowledging the problem and obtaining long term help. Doris meets regularly with the girls outside the group, and urges them, in a more confidential context, to seek additional help.

Within this same context, at another session, Connie (white) talks about her parent's chronic drinking and her own fears about possibly drinking too much. We urged her, within group, to pursue Al-Anon, a support group for families of alcoholics, within which she can begin to sort out the effects her parents' drinking have had upon her, and, at the same time, concentrate on her own health. Sharing in this sense, can be turned into direct action.

Distancing

Able to bear secrets, young women use the space of My Bottom Line to fashion and re-fashion individual and collective identities. Under Doris' expert guidance, it is a space within which selves are tried on, experimented with, accepted and rejected. A key piece of this identity

work among participants involves distancing self from those perceived as "not like us." In this space, in this time, they pull away from others. Unlike previous work, however, which suggests that this form of identity work in urban schools takes place largely along we/they racial lines (Fine, Weis, Powell, 1997; Weis, 1990; Fine and Weis, 1998; Bertram et. al., 1998), particularly among working class whites, and most particularly boys and men, the particular form this distancing work takes here is that of distancing from other neighborhood youth, and, more broadly, from other girls/women thought to be heading down the wrong path. Virtually all of the girls, irrespective of race/ethnicity, who attend group use the space to distance themselves explicitly from those they perceive to be "other" than themselves; those who will not make it, those who will end up pregnant at an early age, those who will be beaten at the hands of men. This is not an idyllic presentation of cross-race interactions and friendships, but rather reflects the observation that when "difference" is constructed in group, it is not constructed along racial lines. Girls from all communities articulate carefully that they wish to be different from those in their neighborhoods, those whom they leave behind in their pursuit of schooling and success. While this may not translate into intimate friendships across racial/ethnic lines, it does mean that the racial "other" is not constructed as the "fall guy" for any of the groups under consideration, contrasting sharply with Julia Marusza's data on girls in a white lower class community center (1998). For none of the groups under consideration are the racial borders specifically erected against which one's own identity is then elaborated. Rather, identity is elaborated <u>across</u> racial and ethnic group as girls distance self from the "other", whether male or female, who will not make it. Certainly there is much racial identity work going on in other sites that reaffirms whiteness, for example, in opposition to blackness, much as previous work suggests (Bertram et. al., 1998; Weis, Proweller and Centrié, 1997). However, in this site alternative positionalities are developed.

Witness Connie and Ayisha below, Connie, a white girl of modest means who lives in one of the racial borderlands of Buffalo, a place which is formerly Italian but now largely Puerto Rican and African American. Although Connie draws an "other", this "other" is racially like self:

Connie: We live in a really small house. I don't have the things my friends have, like all of them at this school are having big graduation parties; I asked my mom to get some small invitations from Party City so that we could at least have the family over; she hasn't even done that. I guess I won't have any celebration. All my friends are having these really big parties. They all have much more money than we do. We live in a really small house; I have a really small bedroom. My one sister lives with us with [her] two kids; another sister lives in a house owned by my father on 14th street. All my sisters are on welfare. We have been on welfare when my father wasn't driving truck. When he lost his job, we didn't even have food in the house. I would go over to my boyfriend's house to eat. His parents are real nice to me. I have no friends in the neighborhood. All I know is that I don't want to be like my sisters and my mother. Their lives have gone nowhere. I don't want to be like them. I want to have lots of money—and food. I want to go to college [she is currently attending the community college].

Connie spends much time in the group discussing her own emotional/physical distancing from her alcoholic father, her immediate family, and neighborhood. The group offers a "safe space" in which she can air these problems and receive support for remaining emotionally separate from her family, for not being dragged down. At the moment, her boyfriend also offers this "safe space". He is 23; they are engaged, having met three years ago. The group supports

this couple, although concerned that Connie might fall into a pattern of drinking like her father. Doris and the other group members check to make certain that Arturo (her boyfriend) is not abusing her physically. Unlike other white girls and women whom we have interviewed extensively, Connie and other group members talk relatively freely about family histories of alcoholism and physical and/or sexual abuse, thus engaging in a language through which one's own and others' circumstances can be understood. In putting this language on the table, they bury such histories far less often than previous research suggests (Weis, Fine, Bertram, Proweller and Marusza, 1998). Additionally, in breaking the silence about alcoholism, welfare, and/or violence in the white family, they shatter the myth that the white family has no problems, thereby encouraging young women across race/ethnicity to understand that such problems are indeed shared, as well as helping young women to face their own situations. Young women across race/ethnicity share their stories of pain and hope in group; the group becomes a space within which this dialogue takes place.

Ayisha, an African American young woman of 16 who has a one-year-old daughter, also sees her task as one of distancing herself from the neighborhood in which she grew up. This distancing is nuanced, however, since she is entirely dependent on her family, boyfriend, and her boyfriend's family, in order to raise her daughter. She walks a fine line—needing to distance from those who will hold her back, but simultaneously recognize and respect those who help her move forward. All live in the same neighborhood:

(discussing the neighborhood)

Ayisha: Actually there is a small percent who are going to do something with their lives. I hate to see 'em like that, but it's like they're all going to go off, smoke weed and drink, go to parties, and hang around the fellows. You know, my mother always told me, "It's not ladylike to sit there and drink on the corner."

> It's just...I mean, they just don't care about their body. It's terrible to see. And I'll be trying to say, you know, I have some friends and they go do that. And I'll be like "You all shouldn't do that." "Well, just because you don't do it..." "OK. Whatever. Whatever you decide to do, I'm behind you. If that's what you're doing, OK, that's what you're going to do." But they're always calling me a preacher or something, you know, every time I try to talk to them.

Ayisha has a somewhat contradictory relationship with her neighborhood. She is supportive of others and understands that they are supportive of her. At the same time, she knows many are going down the wrong path,

> At the rate they're going, they're either going to wind up in jail or dead, because they're always into something; they're always doing something wrong, always. There's never a time that our neighborhood is peaceful, unless it's during the early morning...All this, it's like they'd be on the corner selling drugs, or some of them turn to using drugs. And I keep telling them, "That's not the life you want to live. But I mean, you have kids, you really have to think about what you are doing."

Many of these young women, particularly the African-Americans, are very much connected to their families and neighborhoods, passionately caring about what happens in their communities, while at the same time drawing discursive boundaries around themselves which enable them to go to school and stay on the right track. They engage the "other" constantly, telling them that they are going down the wrong path, while at the same time setting them up as radically different from themselves. Mindy, a white girl living in a largely Polish neighborhood, expresses similar sentiments to Ayisha:

Mindy: Oh, the girls. I'm the oldest girl in my neighborhood by two years, and the youngest ones have just turned thirteen, no, they're going to be fourteen this summer. And all of them are pot heads and I try so hard, like, [to them] "You know, you're so young." And I feel like, I mean, I'm not that old either, but I've been through a lot of things that they're going through at that age. And I was like, I was like, you know, "I had sex at this age," and, you know, "I regret it," you know. And all this and that.

Lois: How old were you when you had sex?

Mindy: I was like fifteen and a half. I had just turned fifteen. And I told them, "I regret it." And even when I first had sex, I just didn't go out with this guy and have sex. I waited a while and I still told them, I was like, "I regretted it." You know, "you're going to regret it. Sooner or later, you're going to regret all these things that you're doing, and I'm just trying to help you." But they don't care. They'll just do what they want to do anyways. Like my ex-boyfriend's sister, she is getting a reputation of being a whore, and all this and that. And I tried tellin' her, "You know, Carla, you got to calm down a little bit." She is fifteen. And she messes with guys that are really like twenty-six, you know. And I said, "What does a twenty-six year old want to do with a fifteen year old?" And she said, "I don't know, they really like me." I was like, "Get out of here!"

Mindy talks with the other girls in the neighborhood, trying to help them while at the same time using them as a foil against which what she sees as her own currently appropriate behavior

is elaborated. While not denying that she did many of the same things at a younger age, she now weaves her femininity and sexuality differently, constructing herself explicitly in relation to others in her neighborhood. In Mindy's case, it is other girls who are centrally located in her discursive constructions. Others in the group focus on boys and girls in the neighborhood as they elaborate what they want themselves to look like in the present and the future. For some, though, like Mindy, it is specifically with the girl/woman subject that they are concerned.

This work of "othering" is done similarly across race and ethnic lines in the group, thus re-writing dominant race scripts of difference in poor areas (Fine and Weis, 1998) at one and the same time as they sculpt alternative forms of femininity/womanhood. All are concerned with elaborating a positive present and future for themselves and see themselves in relation to community "others"; those who do drugs, drink to excess, wear tight clothes, sleep with a lot of guys, walk the streets, don't take school seriously, see older men. The group provides an arena within which these actual constructions get worked through, between, and among participants. Witness, for example, the eighth grade group below.

An Eighth Grade Group

Lois: OK, talk to me about the women in your community.

Krista: About 10:20 they come out. [laughter]

Danielle: Just about every girl, like, on my street, had babies when they were about fourteen, fifteen...

Krista: And I know this one girl, she doesn't live on my street anymore, but she had a baby when she was like fourteen or fifteen, and she went back to the same guy and got pregnant again, so now she's got two kids. And I don't know a lot like that. But I know her, because I think she used to baby-sit me when I was

little, but I don't know if he's there and will come back to her, you know, better and everything. But she got pregnant again.

Lois: What about some of the other women?

Shantelle: Well, some of 'em is fast. They talk to the boys on the corner. All boys on the corner is not bad. They wear a lot of showy clothes.

Tonika: I was watching Jenny Jones, this twelve year old girl, she wore so much make up, she acts like she's about 23. And the make up and stuff. All these girls had these shirts like this [indicates very short], their chest sticking out. I mean, all these short shorts, look like underwear.

Tish: My underwear is not going to be that short.

Tonika: I mean, they're wondering why they'd be getting raped and stuff, even though it's [rape] wrong, but if you walk out of there with your chest sticking out in some short shorts, which is what they do, it's kind of like, what kind of attention you're going to get? You think you're going to get positive attention, you know?

Shantelle: OK. A lot of girls like have babies around my neighborhood. They don't have an education, so like they are kind of, they're low educated, ain't got no money, broken down house and everything, and they're talking to the people in the weed house and everything.

Gloria: The girls around my neighborhood, they all 'Hos'. And they wear nasty outfits, and they go out with older guys.

Delores: They [older guys] just be using, they use you, and they have like three other girlfriends, and they try to play it off. When they get caught, they'd be trying

to like, well, you shouldn't have been doing all this, and all that stuff. And they [the girls] can't do nothing about it.

The eighth grade group, most of whom are African American at this particular session, use the space to talk about "other" girls and women in the neighborhood, carefully distancing themselves from them, and asserting, through discussion, that they are different. By publicly solidifying the boundaries of good behavior, they hope to hang together and remain without problems.

This actual (and potential) discursive work takes place across racial and ethnic groups. The fall guy is not a constructed racial other, as is so common in urban (and suburban; Kress, 1997) schools, but rather those neighborhood youth who are perceived to be headed down the wrong path. In the case of young women, it is those other girls and women, those who are fast, wild, wear tight clothes, who enact femininity and sexuality differently from what they feel is appropriate and safe, who provide the primary "other" against which their own individual and emerging collective self is created. While this may seem to mirror the good girl/bad girl distinction which is so deeply etched in male culture, and indeed it does in some ways, the fact is that these young women are working cross racially to live productive lives, lives which enable choices to be made and which are free from abuse. The young eighth graders know that the "older guys just be using them [these other girls]"; they have "three other girlfriends, and they try to play it off." When the guys are caught, they blame the young women for doing something wrong—"You shouldn't have been doing this and that." These thirteen-year old girls understand this full well and use the group to talk about it. It is exactly this situation which they are trying to avoid, and they know that things only get worse as women grow older. They want to stay in school in order to assert some control over their lives, enabling them to make choices regarding sexuality, men, marriage, and a future devoid of physical and sexual abuse and harassment.

While the officially stated goal of My Bottom Line is to encourage abstinence, much more is happening in this context; young women are weaving a form of collective strength that goes beyond individual abstinence—they are gaining a set of lenses through which to do social critique and opening up the possibility of cross race political work in the future.

It is most interesting in this regard that while "race work" is not in the official curriculum of this project, it is done all the time. The distancing discussed above, which is a by-product of "bearing secrets", encourages a form of gender collectivity that works across traditionally antagonistic race lines. Abstinence work, on the other hand, which is the official curriculum, is done some of the time, raising interesting questions as to what constitutes the lived curriculum as opposed to the intended curriculum of this or any other project. Curriculum theorists (Cornbleth, 1990; McNeil, 1986) have, of course, alerted us to the fact that what is distributed as curriculum in actual classrooms bears, at times, little resemblance to what is seen as the legitimate curriculum (that which is written), and the same dynamic is at play here.

The girls, too, stretch the project in that they interact with what is presented and create something new, in this case, a girls collectivity which works across race lines. By bearing their secrets, they create a community, at least in this space at this time, which transcends individual racial and even social class identities. It is the dialectic of lived curriculum creation which is so noteworthy in this particular context—the context of teaching about abstinence. We will see this even more clearly in the next section.

Contesting Social Stereotypes

Spaces such as the one explored here can offer places where trite social stereotypes are contested; where individuals and collectivities challenge definitions and constructions perpetuated through media, popular culture and so forth. This is highly evident in this group, in

that the girls use the space, under the guidance of Doris, to challenge hegemonic constructions of femininity, race, and teenagers in general.

Doris' role here is important. She urges these young women not to accept prevailing constructions of femininity and masculinity, and to challenge race and gender scripts directly.

February 10, 1997 (field notes)

Doris and I were waiting for the girls to come in for group. Just then Tia walked in for the fifth period meeting. Tia talked about her former boyfriend who got a thirteen-year-old girl pregnant and "now it is too late to do anything about it since it is her fourth month." The girl lives two doors down from her. Her mother's best friend is the mother of the young man involved, and that is how she found out. They had broken up already because she [Tia] had no time to see him, with school and working at Wegmans, but she still cares for him. The boy, as it turns out, is nineteen. Tia can't even look at the girl. She considers her a "slut." She forgives the boy, because "she made him do it," but not the girl.

Doris: "What do you mean you forgive the boy but not the girl?"

Tia: "But she made him do it!"

Doris: "She made him put his penis into her vagina? He had nothing to do with it at all?"

Tia admitted that he had something to do with it, finally, but she still hates the girl since she is a "slut." Since the baby will live only two doors from her, she will see the baby a lot, and she is angry about it. "How is she going to take care of a baby at only thirteen? She is a slut."

Working off of prevailing understandings that boys are not responsible for their sexual activity because they are hormonally programmed to want sex, unlike girls, whose job it is, therefore, to make sure that boys do not get aroused, Tia's response mirrors notions of sexuality and gender circulating in the broader society and available, as Fine (1988) and Whatley (1991) note, in sexuality curriculum. These understandings have it that if girls get in trouble, it is their fault, since they have the responsibility of ensuring that boys are not enticed by sex. This positions women as sexual victims of hormonally programmed males. Under this formulation, the only subject position for females is when they keep men from being aroused. Doris intentionally interrupts this set of understandings by posing the question, "She made him put his penis into her vagina? He had nothing to do with it at all?" Indeed, in the group, Doris, as leader, challenges the notion of victim in a variety of ways.

April 22, 1997; Eighth grade group

Doris:	Is it good to be friends before having a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship?
Delores:	I think you should be friends first, then if it don't work out, you can still be friends.
Ayisha:	That don't work.
Patrice:	I hate it when you make friends with a boy and then he doesn't want to take you out because he think you like a little sister.
Tonika:	I hate it, most of the guys are taken, conceited, or gay [all laugh].
Doris:	How old are you? [she already knows how old they are]
Response:	Thirteen, thirteen, etc.
Doris:	Don't you have a long way to go?
Tonika:	No.

Ayisha: This one guy likes me. Everywhere I go he right there. When I go to my friend Phalla's, he right there.

Doris: Why is that a problem?

Ayisha: Cuz I don't like him. I don't want him to be around me.

Doris: Is this a form of sexual harassment? We walk down the street and someone calls after us. Don't we want real romance? You meet and fall in love?

Tish: But then you find out he's married.

Patrice: He's married and he's got a girlfriend.

Delores: He's married, got a girlfriend and got kids by both of them.

Doris: What do we do when someone is in an unhealthy relationship?

Tish: Try to help them out.

Patrice: Get a restraining order.

Tonika: Talk about violence! When my mom was pregnant, her boyfriend hit her.

Patrice: My mom got beat up, then she left.

Doris: Well, we all know that relationships are bad if there is physical abuse.

Doris offers, in the above, the language of sexual harassment and makes certain that the girls understand that violence in relationships should not be tolerated. While these are obviously complicated issues and suggest no easy solutions, it is key that these discussions are taking place in a public space, indeed a school, under the guidance of a trained adult, who is suggesting that women need to develop their own power in relationships and not passively accept notions that whatever happens to them is their fault. She is, through the group, encouraging the girls to reconstruct what it means to be a woman/girl, working against the grain, offering an alternative voice to the deafening victim mentality. Helping the girls establish their bottom line—a bottom

line that recognize that women ought not be victims, comes through loud and clear in the group interactions.

The young women further the reconstruction of gender within this site, contesting what they see as male surveillance of women's bodies:

Susan: I'm uncomfortable around guys.

Lois: Why?

Susan: Oh, I don't know. Like, I had my dress, you know, not low cut, because that's not the way I feel comfortable, it's just like guys are always thinking about sex, and it drives me crazy. Because you know, with these guys on my street, I'm like, if they say 'hi', or I went over, and going to talk to them, and I realized through the whole conversation this guy is just like staring at my breasts, you know. And they were staring, and I was like, "OK, bye," and I left. He was just staring at my breasts. Was he looking for them to see if they were there? They're so small, or what? I was "Hello." I just kept on with the conversation and I was like, looking down, looking up. What, guys? They're driving me crazy.

Kathy also resents what she sees as the male gaze:

Kathy: It's hard. It's like, especially when what you believe if it's not like what everybody else is doing. It's like really hard to like keep your word to it. There's a lot of pressure out there. It's hard to really go out without like guys looking at you or something like that. I mean, I get freaked out. Like all the news about rape and everything. I get freaked out wherever I see like a guy just standing on the corner. I go out driving and I like lock all my doors when

I see some guy just standing there by himself. But I get scared. I'm really scared.

Working through sensitive issues cross-race encourages more open attitudes toward race issues in general, serving to contest and re-write social scripts of race difference (Fine, Weis and Powell, 1997). Although very little specifically "race work" is done in the group, such work is very much in the minds of participants. Mindy, a white young woman from a predominantly Polish area in Buffalo, has this to say:

Mindy: And my best friend is black. And a lot of guys from my neighborhoods try to get with her…and they're all white. It's different…a guy will be prejudiced, but he'll be more prejudiced against a guy that's a different race, not the girl. You know, it's supposed to be, especially in my neighborhood, "These [white girls] are <u>our</u> girls," you know. And if you [girls] go outside the neighborhood, they are mad. The thing about the guys not wanting the girls to be with people from a different race is because if we're with guys from a different race, then it kind of leaves them [white guys] out. I don't know if that makes sense, but that's the way I look at it. Like a lot of the guys in my neighborhood expect the girls to be with them, like from my neighborhood. And they [the guys] can have girls on the side.

Lois: And these girls—Puerto Rican girls, black girls, they're the ones on the side?

Mindy: Uh huh. And when we're messing with other guys, whatever, they get so, I don't know, they don't get violent, but they start saying things like…my one friend Jean…all she does is date black people. They'll call her "nigger lover."

Mindy connects racism among neighborhood boys directly with expressed notions of male superiority, with male desires to stake out and control women as property, while at the same time having sex on the side with girls of their choice, often girls of color. She comments further:

Mindy: Like there's this thing now where girls are expected to share boyfriends, especially in my neighborhood. Like you have this boyfriend, but he'll be going out with another girl. But it really doesn't matter, you know, because she's from a different neighborhood, and he'll go to see her on the weekends.

Lois: What about the opposite? Like what about you, if you have more than one boyfriend?

Mindy: That's not how it works. It's kind of going back to the old days, where they're superior.

For Mindy, young men are attempting to stake out the right to have as many women as they want, while at the same time controlling the sexuality of neighborhood girls, authoring them as "sluts" if they see boys outside the neighborhood, particularly boys of color. She understands this as a way of re-establishing male superiority in relationships wherein men/boys control all the actions/desires/sexual behavior of girls/women.

Situated in the middle of a girls' group in a public school, one funded by an abstinence based sex education movement, young women traverse a variety of subjects regarding race, gender, sexuality, and men. Moving through these issues, under the watchful and caring eye of Doris Carbonell-Medina, young women begin to form a new collective—a collective based on a stronger woman/girl, one who is different in many ways from those left behind emotionally in the neighborhood. It is a collective that surges cross-race, although not necessarily in terms of intimate friendships. But these young women, nevertheless, share the most intimate pieces of themselves in the group setting, creating a form of friendship that may or may not transcend the

bounds of the school, or even the group. And they think it is important—they think Womanfocus gives them the space they need to think things out—and all this accomplished under a funding source which attempts to entrench notions of femininity and sexuality which are diametrically opposed in many respects to those encouraged in the group.

Concluding

I have focused here on a group within a public school, one that offers opportunities to author alternative gendered and race meanings from those "naturally" distributed in such settings. Doris, being supported by Shirley, the guidance counselor, and the young women discussed here, are working against the grain—challenging representations and inventing new ones, playing with and against hegemonic notions of gender, and at times, race, so as to live productive lives free from male abuse. It is the desire to live such lives that brings these young women to this space, a deeply held hope that life can be better than that which they see in much of their surroundings. They are in school, hope to stay there, and want to be different from those youth whom they see as lost. And it is this desire that keeps them coming to group and keeps them talking.

The question can be raised, though, to what end does this type of group exist? Do the good parts of the group, the new expressions of collectivity, persist beyond school, or even beyond the group itself? To what extent can such a group ever challenge the existing distribution of power and resources, distributions which ultimately determine the lives that these young women will live? In other words, can such a group ever challenge fundamental structural inequalities? Or, does a group like this only put a Band-Aid on a sore, one that cannot be healed by an intervention? To this I can only offer partial answers, of course. There are those who will argue strongly that such groups can never challenge the existing distribution of power and resources in

society and therefore can never really do anything for the lives of these girls. In fact, some say, such groups perpetrate only a lie in that they do not really confront the kinds of inequalities facing youth like this, whether along race, social class, or gendered lines. While I may have some sympathy for this argument, ultimately I come down differently on this set of points. These young women are struggling hard to escape what they see a life filled with exploitation and abuse. They want choices—choices to go to school, to live productively, to live free from male violence and exploitation. And this, to some extent at least, they do control. By beginning the discussion around abuse, by beginning the discussion around victimization, welfare, men, alcoholism and violence, they gain information, information that many women of our generation did not have. They gain a language—a language of what is abuse, of what is "normal" and what is not in relationships where sex is involved. They hear from trusted adults and their peers what the pitfalls in relationships can be, and what to do when confronted with such pitfalls. What to do with male violence, whether from a boyfriend of a father. What to do when one sees someone else drink too much, or what to do when he has "only hit me once." They hear from Doris, publicly and quickly, that "Believe me, ladies, if he hits you once, he will hit you again." Speaking out and hearing from others also readies young women to continue to do so in the future. If they speak out once, they will be able to speak out again. If they listen to others about sensitive subjects once, they will be able to do so in the future. They will be able to share and build women's communities, communities which support their right to live with respect, free from exploitation and abuse. I and many others like me know that once we speak about horrors and tragedies in our lives, the monkey is off our back—it is easier to speak again. We know that we will not be rejected, be seen as "bad," because of what happened to us. And so these young women will learn too. By speaking out now, it will be easier to speak out in the future. They have learned that no one will reject them because of what has happened. This represents a form

of strength that should never be underestimated. And we, as women, need to continue to speak out, individually and in groups about our shared experiences. But this set of understandings takes many years to come to fruition. These young women have made a beginning in a group designed to encourage abstinence. But a new collective is forming—indeed, one that is based on cross-race interactions and one aimed at understanding and challenging gendered situations and meanings. And so this group is invaluable—it is the beginning of learning to speak out and trust, as we explore ourselves and our position as women.

Endnotes

[1]An important exception to the statement is the work by Bonnie Nelson Trudell. Trudell focused carefully on the day to day workings of such programs.

[2]There is a difference in the language of abstinence based and abstinence only programs. The particular program studied here is an abstinence based program. whose funding source is Buffalo Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Services, as funded by the Office of Child and Family Services (formerly Department of Social Services). The agency (Preventionfocus) has applied for moines under the RFP outlined in footnote one in order to continue programming for My Bottom Line, the program discussed here. Although not bound by abstinence only funding at this moment in time, the issues raised in this paper are critical if we are to carve space within abstinence only programs.

[3]My Bottom Line is under the auspices of Womanfocus, a program stem in the larger Preventionfocus which receives much of its money from New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services. Preventionfocus is aimed at promoting healthy lifestyles throughout the life cycle, through prevention of drug, alcohol, substance abuse, and early pregnancy.

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